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SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC AND DRL FOR WENDY SILVERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN 2008 ELECTION: WHO ARE THE OPPOSITION
CANDIDATES?

REF: A. BAKU 856
[1](#)B. BAKU 882

Classified By: Political Economic Counselor Rob Garverick, for reasons
1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The campaign for the presidency of Azerbaijan began on September 17, with current president Ilham Aliyev and six other candidates competing. Major campaign themes, to the extent that they are voiced, include increasing the power of the parliament, fighting corruption, and "liberating" Nagorno Karabagh. None of the six opposition candidates is well positioned to run a competitive campaign against the current president. This combined with the decision by the five traditional opposition leaders to boycott the election indicates that this election will not be competitive. Political commentators are looking to voter turnout as the key metric to judge popular interest in the political life of the country, and most expect it to be below 30%, unless artificially boosted by intervening officials.
END SUMMARY

CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION REGISTERS SEVEN CANDIDATES

[1](#)2. (C) In accordance with the amended election code, the official campaign for Azerbaijan's presidency began on September 17. In total, the Central Election Commission (CEC) registered seven candidates. These include: incumbent President Ilham Aliyev (New Azerbaijan Party); Igbal Agazade (Hope Party); Gulamhuseyn Alibayli (Intellectuals Party); Fuad Aliyev (Liberal Democratic Party); Fazil Gazanfaroglu Mustafayev (Great Establishment Party); Gudrat Hasanguliyev (Whole Azerbaijan Party); Hafiz Hajiyevev (Modern Musavat Party). This cable will describe the six opposition candidates and assess the status of their campaigns.

[1](#)3. (C) As reported septel (ref A), Azerbaijan's largest opposition parties, according to historical trends, are boycotting the election. Observers expect this decision to seriously diminish the competitiveness of this election, as many of the newcomers are relatively unknown. The five boycotting parties announced their intention to hold a rally on September 28 to express concerns about the election in one of nine sites they chose in central Baku. The Mayor of Baku, however, denied permission to hold a rally in any of these sites, offering instead the Bibi Heybat Stadium outside the city (ref B). The five parties refused to use this site, and are now weighing their options on holding another event. As reported ref B, the City of Baku earlier identified 11 sites for political rallies, but these sites are largely in remote or inconvenient parts of the city.

REGISTERED OPPOSITION CANDIDATES

14. (C) Igbal Agazade is chairman of the Umid (Hope) Party and was elected as a Member of Parliament in 2005. In 2003, however, Agazade supported Isa Gambar's (Musavat Party) candidacy for president, and was one of the leaders of the post-election protests. Agazade was arrested and reportedly tortured, leading to a public statement in which he claimed Isa Gambar was responsible for the violence during the rallies. This year Agazade has been able to use personal wealth to finance a comparatively well-organized presidential campaign, and has a crowd of motivated supporters whom Embassy officials witnessed at the official launch party for his campaign. Agazade has managed to place more campaign posters than any other opposition candidate throughout Baku and the regions. The New Azerbaijan Party filed a complaint against Agazade for distributing DVDs before the campaign officially began, despite these DVDs not mentioning the presidential campaign. Agazade apologized and received no penalty from the CEC.

15. (C) Gulamhuseyn Alibayli split this year from the Popular Front Party (PFP) and on September 23 announced the launch of his own party called the Intellectuals Party. Alibayli reports that the reason for the split is that he disagreed with PFP's decision to boycott the election. He was a member of parliament from 2000-2005 but was forced to give up his seat in 2005 when PFP decided to boycott the election results. The major theme of his campaign is to reform the

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government to give more power to parliament and to municipalities, rather than the president and the regional officials known as ExComs. He also reports wanting to improve the election system, fight corruption, and create a new body to oversee spending of oil revenues. Given his lack of party infrastructure, it seems unlikely that he could have gathered the 40,000 signatures required to register as a candidate without some assistance. Many political commentators believe that this aid came from the GOAJ in order to increase the number of candidates in the election after the major opposition parties announced their boycott. Alibayli has not posted large numbers of posters, nor held any large rallies.

16. (C) Fuad Aliyev is the chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party, but this party has few resources to conduct a campaign. The International Republican Institute (IRI) reports that Aliyev does not own a car and still lives with his mother. Aliyev reports that he receives his only support from his links to liberal democratic parties in Turkey, Ukraine, and Pakistan. His platform calls for holding referenda on a number of issues including giving more power to parliament, NATO membership, and adding free healthcare and internet connections for all citizens into the constitution. He reports that his four regional representatives had no problems collecting signatures, but are facing pressure now that the campaign has begun.

17. (C) Fazil Gazanfaroglu Mustafayev is the head of the Great Establishment Party and a member of parliament. He was a professor and has written twelve books. He considers his party to be "constructive opposition," meaning that they work with the government to pass legislation. His major reform would be to remove government control over the economy, and believes that economic liberty is more important than freedom of speech. He would also like to transfer more power to parliament and municipalities. He does not plan to hold any large campaign events, but only to use his free air time on TV and to print brochures.

18. (C) Gudrat Hasanguliyev is the leader of the Whole Azerbaijan Party, which split from PFP in 2003. The party is small, but they have managed to place posters throughout Baku

and in some regions. Hasanguliyev held meetings in the southern region of Lankaran during the week of September 25, which he claimed were disturbed by local officials. He is most known for advocating for the rights of ethnic Azeris in Iran, including wanting to change the name of Azerbaijan to "North Azerbaijan." Hasanguliyev, unlike other candidates, claims to have developed a comprehensive platform for his campaign, which he reports includes three major ideas: liberating Nagorno Karabagh; eliminating poverty by eliminating corruption; and changing life through fair, just civil society.

¶9. (C) Hafiz Hajiyeu is the head of the Modern Musavat Party. He is known for making bold, off-the-cuff statements to the press. He threatened to hold a rally in front of the Embassy if an Embassy official would not meet with him. Despite claiming to have large public support including over 90,000 party members, Hajiyeu has not actively engaged in the campaign yet. He reports that his platform consists of joining NATO, ridding the country of corruption, and re-taking Nagorno Karabagh by force. His office is decorated with prominently displayed pictures of former president Heydar Aliyev.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The difficult pre-election environment and the boycott by the traditional opposition parties make it difficult for a presidential election to be held in a competitive manner. None of the six opposition candidates that are running in the election represents a legitimate alternative to the current regime, as party structures are inadequate and platforms are incomplete. Given this situation, political commentators point to voter turnout as the only open question in this election. If turnout is in the 20-30% range, as many analysts predict, it will signal popular disinterest in the political life of the country. Analysts warn that any electoral fraud committed during this election will likely be focused on increasing this turnout

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